

# Stillness between the Nodes of the Networked Classroom

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## Abstract

The Network Society, as described by Castells (1994), entwines nearly every aspect of lived existence for increasing numbers the world over. Students learn to quickly adapt to change, typically faster than their teachers. In fact, it is the youth who thrive within contemporary hypermediated social networks, and are often much better equipped to use not only the hardware, but understand the cultural implications that they represent.

Educators, though slow to adapt to these changes, are beginning to adapt. Distance Education at the university level is beginning to reflect some of these changes, while still tied to outdated notions. This paper presents an overview of an undergraduate general education course titled Introduction to Art, offered in a Distance Education format at Indiana University of Pennsylvania (US). Understanding the possibilities for creative expression and critique in the art classroom, including modes of resistance informed by the work of Deleuze and Guattari (1984) will be crucial for pedagogical tactics that make use of the moments when informational exchange threatens to become noise, or when stillness is just as disruptive.

## Keywords

Art Education, Distance Education, Network Society, Rhizome, Society of Control

## Online Flatline

When I was offered the opportunity, in the Spring of 2004, to develop a distance education version of the Liberal Studies course *ARHI 101: Introduction to Art* at Indiana University of Pennsylvania, I agreed without hesitation, based on my prior experiences with both the course and the technologies involved. As I developed the course, these basic questions were foremost on my mind: would the course be more successful if instruction were tied to my previous pedagogical approaches, or reflected a completely new set of teaching strategies. Would it, in fact, be best designed as a hybrid of the two?

My decision was primarily based on the course as I had taught up until that time; lecture/discussion focusing on broad themes such as art and propaganda, gender and creativity, and museums and power. As all of my lectures were already posted to the WebCT server, the transition to a relevant distance education format was simple. What was not simple was incorporating in-class activities including studio experiences, museum visits, and campus walking tours that had always been my favorite part of the course.

This first summer of teaching online went by like a blur, primarily due to the short, five week semester, but also due to another, unanticipated feature of the course. Students completed activities based on course readings, posted lectures, and questions generated from the discussion boards – our primary means of interaction. My general response was positive: I had not planned for an experience close to that of the traditional classroom, and, having taught using the technologies previously, my adaptation rate was quick. However, one aspect seemed troubling. The responses of the students seemed unremarkable. Their thoughts and reactions to the artworks and theories studied, usually spanning from dull to brilliant, from inspired to insulting in the traditional classroom, were flattened into a homogenous mass. A stillness. An *online flatline*.

There was no confrontation in the discussion boards. The charged ideas and ideologies presented

were responded to with little to no energy. There was also a noticeable lack of awkward silence that might follow a particularly confusing topic, or simply any topic presented at eight AM. This flattening could have been the result of any number of factors: the semester during which the course was offered, the particular group of students participating, the responses that were requested from the students. Out of these, I have to think that the course delivery – the distance at which we held not only the ideas discussed, but each other’s comments – resulted in exchanges that were very similar to the next.

Were the patterns of communication tied to the technologies used? The history of the Internet is coupled with notions of technological utopianism, leading to theories that online communication allows for multiple identities to develop, freed from the constraints of the ‘real world’ (Turkle, 1995). Why was there seemingly less freedom in these responses? Does it have to do with the expectations of the institution, based in centralized forms of control and rigid disciplinary segmentation?

Or, do these responses relate to the everyday use of the technologies? Email is used primarily for short conversations, while Instant Messenger communication is typically composed of dense chunks of information, and is quickly becoming the preferred mode of digital communication for U.S. teenagers (Lenhart, et al, 2005). Does the use of the discussion board, inasmuch as it resembles email exchange, represent an outmoded form of communication for students? Or, was this my problem? Was I reading student responses when they were presented to be *heard*, nomadically maneuvering through the territory between written and spoken text that seems to relate to networked digital communication? Finally, could it be that the answer was to be found in the network itself, one that is decidedly decentralized?

### **Education in the Network Society**

While wishing to avoid technological determinism, I do feel that my responses to the previous questions are based in the nature of education in what Castells (1996) calls the ‘Network Society.’ In his writings, he suggests that contemporary sociocultural and technological networks have shifted almost every aspect of contemporary life the world over. In regards to education, he states that such systems are the most resistant to change; particularly, the entrenched hierarchies of higher education. With the recent growth of universities that are primarily online, such as the University of Phoenix, many in higher education are debating the future of networked forms of education, while others rush to develop online course content without considering long-term consequences or appropriate pedagogical adaptations (Trend, 1999).

Much of the resistance to online education comes from the lack of physical meetings with students, both from faculty and students alike. In 2002 only six percent of college students in the US enrolled in an online course, and 56% stated that it was a worthwhile experience (Jones, 2002). However, this resistance seems to be based upon a romanticized view of traditional schooling, where students are attentive, engaged, and eager to interact with teacher and student alike. Anyone who has spent time in a classroom recently knows that this is typically far from the case. Many students are eager to interact with each other, possibly not in the manner anticipated by the teacher. The passing of notes is a prime example of a form of communication taking place outside of official lines of communication, a precursor to ‘Instant Messenger’ and the multilevel channels of classroom communication simultaneously in operation.

Classrooms were hypertextual long before the term existed, each gesture or word opening up to a range of potential responses. Students learn to negotiate these spaces early on, as school is, for many, the first regulated space for social interaction outside of the home. As soon as they learn the

rules of these spaces, they learn how to *use* the rules, following them to the letter, or bending them to their will. They eagerly interact, or resist the responses that the teacher anticipates; possibly combining the two, double-coding them using the language of teen sarcasm.

Educators interested in exploring the possibilities for distance education, particularly within the arts, should consider the distance that exists in the traditional classroom, spaces that are already infused with digital technologies, and, perhaps more importantly, the sociological residue of such forms of communication. The notion of *screening* as discussed by Baudrillard (2002) plays an important role in the distances created and maintained within the traditional classroom space. As technologies continue to miniaturize and wireless connections expand, the ability for students to occupy themselves with their own screens increases, multiplying not only the amount of information available, but also the possibilities for connection as well as disconnection. Text messaging via cellphones, as one example, is a common activity in my physical classroom space. While I do not usually appreciate this, it is next to impossible to eliminate this from the educational environment. Perhaps it is a matter of having them integrate the screen with the course information. As I have experienced, utilizing networked technologies in the traditional classroom can create situations where discussions extend beyond the physical space, where students discuss works of art with distant friends, or test out theories of commerce in real time, disrupting stillness in productive ways.

When education takes place via distance learning, the screen becomes centralized as the main conduit for learning. One possibility for unsettling the 'online flatline' is to acknowledge the multitasking that is part of computer use. The contemporary computer screen is the space for multitasking, where IM conversations share mental and visual space with gameplay, research, and any other combination of audiovisual information. Expecting students to respond in what might be thought of as a coherent, logical manner might be antithetical to the rhizomatic lines of flight encouraged by the CRT.

### **Wasp/Orchid**

Deleuze and Guattari's (1984) discussion of the rhizome adds to the discussion of the homogeneity of interaction in distance education. In particular, their description of the 'unnatural couplings' of the wasp and the orchid points towards an acknowledgement of the notion of purity upon which much of the critique of distance education rests.<sup>1</sup>

The wasp and the orchid exist in a symbiotic relationship. However, Deleuze and Guattari suggest that their exchanges extend beyond pollination; their interactions are social, visual, and sexual. As these couplings are essential for each species, they cannot adequately be considered in isolation. The networks that they form leads to the creation of a third entity, a wasp/orchid, which questions the taxonomic divisions that separate not only species, but forms of life, or even life and lack thereof.

In a similar manner, we might consider the traditional classroom space as a hybrid of the analog and the digital, of centralized control and decentralized interaction. The spaces of distance education are also the spaces of hybridity, of centralization and decentralization, which, if they are to maintain a level of flux, must remain as such. However, as Deleuze (1993) suggests, the tendency of the digital is to reduce information to code that can be more easily catalogued and controlled. In his response to Foucault's (1972) notion of the disciplinary society, Deleuze theorizes that the contemporary subject can no longer be adequately understood as an 'individual.' As disciplinary societies shift to 'societies of control,' the modern subject that Foucault builds much of his ideas upon starts to erode: the individual becomes divided, becomes a *dividual*, the Panopticon is replaced by digital gatekeepers, and visual surveillance shifts to dataveillance. This shift to dataveillance, what Lyon

(1995) calls 'The Electronic Eye,' is often voluntary, such as the sharing of personal information with telemarketers or businesses on the Internet. The vast networks of communication and control that collect personal data and catalog behavior result in the fragmentation of the individual into at least two bodies: physical body and databody.

It is the notion of the *dividual* that I find important to acknowledge when discussing distance education; and, in particular, the interactions described previously as an 'online flatline.' Each student contributed responses to the discussion board, based on interpretations of the course readings and reflections upon personal experience. As these responses were catalogued, they built up to form a representation of each person. This body of data, understood as a databody, is a type of auxiliary personality, standing in for the student in the online forum.

The flattening of these responses seems directly tied to the distance of the databody. Each student was free to respond to the course questions, and to each other, but within a highly monitored space.<sup>2</sup> The disruptions and silences associated with traditional instruction, in the discussion board, become catalogued, recorded, easily returned to the discussion with a few clicks of the mouse. Within this monitored space, the responses form a common denominator. In this manner, the identity of the individual student becomes, to a certain extent, a facet of a composite 'student body.' Each allowing her/himself to respond within tightly controlled boundaries.

The limitations of online exchange should be addressed, particularly by proponents of distance education who invest heavily in the benefits of 'interactivity' and 'online community.' Educators should resist placing limitations on technologies that have contributed to flexible technocultural forms represented by recent social media sites such as Facebook, YouTube, MySpace, and Flickr. Acknowledging moments of rupture, similar to those described earlier, and incorporating opportunities for multiple forms of interaction will hopefully allow for this flexibility to be maintained, so that online instruction is not used to reproduce the mechanisms of the societies of control.

### **Networked Classroom**

The educational structures developed during the Industrial Revolution should be reconsidered in the Network Society. Distance education has the opportunity to respond to developing media forms, and introduce related forms of pedagogy, if the hybrid nature of education is acknowledged. Social media offers educators in both traditional and distance education the opportunity to acknowledge multiple forms of self-representation, for new forms of interaction and engagement to fuse with those practices that are time-tested and effective.

These issues are important for art educational practice in particular, as artists, art historians, theorists, and viewers become accustomed to practices that blur the lines between the analog and the digital, between information and identity. Art educators should make certain that the visual qualities of distance education technologies are continually critiqued, and that democratic pedagogical strategies are not lost in the adoption of new techniques and technologies. As McClaren (1991) writes:

A critical pedagogy must grapple with the ways in which youth resist the dominant culture *at the level of their bodies* because in doing so the utopian moments to which such resistance points can be transformed pedagogically into strategies of empowerment.

The complexities of distance education in the network society can be addressed through active

responses to the forms of identity created in online instruction; the databodies that accumulate on discussion boards and in chat rooms, along with the hybrid bodies formed through social media. These are forms of networked identity that might allow for the reconsideration of the *dividual* as a form of decentralized empowerment that disrupt the centralization of the panoptic pedagogue, unsettling the stillness of the online flatline.

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<sup>1</sup> Brian Massumi uses this phrase in his description of the rhizome, in Capitalism and Schizophrenia: A Users Guide (1994).

<sup>2</sup> WebCT documents all posts, allowing for threaded and unthreaded views. Also, each student is monitored according to number of posts read, responded to, including the last date and time that they accessed the message board.

## Biographical Notes

Robert Sweeny is an assistant professor of Art and Art Education at Indiana University of Pennsylvania. He is coordinator of the Art Education program, and earned his PhD in Art Education from The Pennsylvania State University in 2004. He has published widely on the topics of digital visual culture, digital aesthetics, videogames, and the relationship between surveillance technologies, works of art, and the male gaze, in journals such as *Studies in Art Education* (US), *Visual Arts Research* (US), *Media/Culture* (AU), and *Surveillance in Society* (UK). He has presented his research at both National and International conferences. He is also a working artist, having earned his MFA from Maryland Institute, College of Art in 2000. His artwork explores similar territory as his research, deriving sculptural forms and large-scale drawings from the intersections of complex self-organizing biological systems, networked digital technologies, and cartoons.